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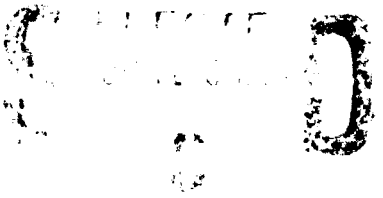

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MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONS: FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF OPERATION DESERT SHIELD

by

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Major/U.S. Marine Corps

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The uneasy relationship that exists between the media and the military in America today can be traced back to events that shaped this country's character. Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman treated reporters as individuals just short of spies and kept them out of his camps. Angered by the European higher commands' press restrictions during World War I, America's premier correspondent Richard Harding Davis took his own sudden leave of the combat theatre.

Probably the event most significant to the current relationship occurred during the tumultuous 1960s, when Americans watched on the evening news as their sons suffered wounds and died in Vietnam. For the first time battlefield access was not restricted for reporters. "News of the most highly dramatized failure in our history poured out of the hundreds of helicopters and jeeps available to reporters."[1]

The argument over media access to military operations has since continued unabated. The media claim that by statute, common law or custom, the citizens and the press have access to a majority of government assemblies and activities. Custom indeed has found the press on battlefields since the Crimean War. Calling on this history, and the First Amendment guarantee to freedom of the press, the media continues to call for greater access to military operations.

While not denying the media avenues to cover combat, the military does see reasons to limit this access in the interest of operational security. Officials feel there are certain portions of the battlefield and information that should be shielded from the press to avoid endangering mission success and troop safety.

It is here that the difficulty exists. This dilemma has led to an inability to settle on a set of guidelines that both groups agree are tight enough to avoid releasing information potentially harmful to U.S. operations or personnel, yet are loose enough to allow reporters the access they feel is required to report a complete picture of the conflict.

This paper will examine how the military and the media have attempted to accommodate that point of friction in Operation Desert Shield. Because of the on-going nature at this writing of Operation Desert Storm, only brief comments are included on the media coverage of Desert Storm as a result of the Desert Shield build up. The military-media relationship of Operation Desert Shield will be placed in perspective by reviewing the press relations in Operation Urgent Fury, the reflagging of Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, and Operation Just Cause. Lessons learned will be drawn from these experiences and applied to Operation Desert Shield. The scope of this paper will cover media relations to the termination of Operation Desert Shield, i.e., until January 16, 1991, when Operation Desert Storm was initiated.

CHAPTER II

RECENT MILITARY-MEDIA RELATIONS

Operation Urgent Fury. On October 25, 1983, elements of Joint task Force 120 conducted simultaneous amphibious and airborne assaults on the island of Grenada. Despite unexpected resistance, in three days the task force accomplished its key mission by evacuating a total of 599 American citizens and 80 foreign nationals.

Intentionally excluding the media from the island until the third day of the operation created a fire storm of criticism from journalists. Loud complaints were registered that the military denied the American people the right to be continuously informed about government matters.

In a post-operation Joint Chiefs of Staff statement, the planned press coverage was explained:

> From the beginning, plans called for media from Barbados to be placed on the ground in Grenada not later than the morning of the second day of the operation. Unfortunately, resistance was more determined than expected. and the initial objective of locating and freeing all students was not met. The ground commander determined that essential resources could not be devoted to assist the media the second day. (1)

An initial group of 15 journalists arrived on Grenada on October 27, brought in by tactical aircraft. This group was able to witness portions of a major Ranger airmobile assault on the Calivigny Barracks complex, including heavy artillery preparation of the objective.

The following day, 27 more media personnel were brought in, and the next day 47 more arrived in Grenada. Starting the eighth day following the landing, unlimited access was granted via military aircraft.

The media complained that military planners were following Britain's lead in the Falklands Islands conflict by excluding the press from the start of the confrontation. Reasons given by the military for not including the media in the planning process were operational security and the dangers to the media during the initial assault.

The reaction of one CBS News executive seemed to sum up the media position: "They don't want us there in case they screw up."[2]

In response to cries by the media of cover up, then-JCS Chairman Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., USA, formed what became known as the Sidle Panel. This was a group of active duty Public Affairs (PA) officers and retired media representatives headed by retired MajGen. Winant G. Sidle, former Army Chief of Information, who were charged to fashion guidelines for media coverage of military operations.

The Sidle Panel. The most prominent recommendation made by the Sidle Panel formed the basis for creating a national media pool which would be composed of members of each branch of journalism who could be called upon on short notice to cover breaking military operations. The pool, when activated, would be furnished general ground rules to follow in their coverage. News

products from the pool would be distributed to all news agencies on an equal access basis.

Additionally the panel emphasized the need for public affairs planning concurrently with operational planning. In response, the Joint Operations Planning Manual was changed to require formulation of public affairs guidance for specific operations upon receipt of the JCS warning order message.

Media representatives who spoke before the panel were unanimous in their opposition to pools in general. "However, they also agreed tat they would cooperate in pool agreements if that were necessary for them to obtain early access to an operation."[3]

1987-88 Persian Gulf Pools. The first use of the media pool concept during hostile actions by U.S. forces began in July 1987 with the decision to reflag Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. This was a use of the national media pool that drew both praise and criticism from the press.

Though the first passage through the Strait of Hormuz and into the Gulf was relatively uneventful, the 10-member pool and their military escorts witnessed the mine strike by the supertanker Bridgeton near the end of the transit on July 24th.

The ground rules for the pool were laid out ahead of time, including provisions for a security review of all pool material at the source before release of news products. Media complaints about this pool activation included concerns over delays in transmission of reports, censorship of pool products, and

difficulties in getting pool photo and film products ashore in a timely manner.

Accommodations were made by the military for some of these complaints. In one case, a U.S. warship delayed its scheduled movement to await rendezvous with a vessel sent to pick up media pool products.[4]

CBS reporter John W. Sheahan had harsh words for the use of the pool in the Persian Gulf. "...the greatest failing of the Pentagon Press Pool, in its Persian Gulf incarnation ... was that reporters were deliberately kept away from news that should have been reported to the American people."[5]

Sheahan cited as examples the failure to allow media to cover the October 19, 1987 shelling of an Iranian oil platform in retaliation for the missile attack on a U.S.-flagged tanker off Kuwait, and the banning of the press from the recovery of an AH-1 Cobra helicopter that had crashed during the April 18, 1988, battle with Iran.

However, one pool reporter, Mark Thompson of Knight-Ridder Newspaper, later wrote, "First and foremost, (the pool) had been a success inasmuch as our audiences were better served from our having been there, rather than at our Washington desks, for having covered the escort operations, albeit under unusual conditions."[6]

Because of persistent tensions in the Gulf, a regional pool was maintained on ships in the area. On April 18, 1988, three surface action groups (SAGs) were formed in the Gulf; one each

tasked to destroy two Iranian oil platforms being used to direct Iranian military operations in the Gulf, and one to sink the Iranian frigate Sabalan; the pool was sent with the latter SAG.

The pool's SAG not only successfully engaged the Sabalan, but also her sister ship, the Sahand. But the pool had to settle for over-the-horizon attacks on both ships.

> While the ongoing actions were newsworthy event for the pool, they often did not provide good visual opportunities for the still photographer and television crew. This is an age of over-the-horizon naval engagements, and the pool got a taste of what it's like to cover high-tech combat involving long-range missiles, radar intercepts, and high-altitude aircraft sorties. (7)

While some criticism was heard concerning the Persian Gulf pools, most journalist involved rated it a qualified success. Richard Pyle, an AP correspondent, wrote:

> ... the experience did answer the question raised by Grenada and by critics since: It is, indeed, possible for the military and the news media to work together in a highly charged, fast-changing war situation, without tripping over each other and without endangering the military's first priority, operational security. (8)

While the pool concept proved successful on board ships in a controlled environment, making it work for a land campaign was another challenge.

Operation Just Cause. Pool coverage of a ground combat operation made an inauspicious debut, to say the least. It would be hard to design a deliberate scenario that could break as many guidelines established to make media coverage in combat a smooth process, as did Operation Just Cause.

A review of the handling of the media on Panama was written by Fred S. Hoffman, former NBC newsman and Pentagon spokesman, at

the direction of Pete Williams, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. In a highly critical report, Hoffman noted;

> The Southern Command did have a contingency plan for accommodating the pool, but its provisions were very general. What was needed was a specific plan tailored to the upcoming operation. As MajGen. Roosma of the 18th Airborne Corps said, 'A public affairs annex to an operational order must be written in great detail. The time to prepare such a plan is not during a crisis, but before hand.' (9)

The first and most critical mistake made concerning media coverage was not making the decision to activate the media pool until it was too late to deliver the pool on the scene to cover the operation from the start.

Once the decision was made to activate the media pool by Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, an additional delay of "a couple of hours" before the pool members were notified "violated our procedures" according to Southern Command's Public Affairs After Action Report on Operation Just Cause.[10]

"The 7:30 pm callout guaranteed that the pool would reach Panama hours after the operation began just before 1 am Wednesday (December 20, 1988)," Hoffman would write in his critique.[11]

By the time the pool arrived in Panama, most of the combat action was over, and reporters were allowed to see little of the action that remained. Hoffman commented: "A lack of helicopters -- which could have been avoided with proper planning -- prevented the pool from reporting much of what was left of the action by the time the pool reached Panama."[12]

The After Action Report noted another criticism concerning on-site briefings: "While the DOD media pool was in Panama, there were no regularly scheduled daily update briefings for the press ... More briefings probably would have served the media well."[13]

The report also noted "various units that had operations orders stating that soldiers were not to talk to reporters..."[14] This last point was a concern echoed by NBC correspondent Fred Francis, a member of the pool, in "An Evaluation of the DOD Media Pool" that was appended to the After Action Report:

> There seemed to be a constant friction and confusion between the Pentagon's office of Defense Information who wanted to make things happen but who had no clout on the ground, the staffs of both the CINC General Thurman and Operation Commander LtGen Stiner, who seemed to care little what access the pool enjoyed, and the host Public Affairs officers of the Southern Command who were undermanned and caught in the middle. (15)

The pool experience in Just Cause served to remove any goodwill between the military and media that might have been built up from the Persian Gulf pools. The operation left reporters angry over the denial of access to battles, and, in what was perceived by the press as a public relations gambit, the attempts by PA officers to shuttle them from sight to sight after battles. The stage was set for a very close examination by the military and the media of the next pool experience.

CHAPTER III

OPERATION DESERT SHIELD

In the late summer and fall of 1990, the United States found itself in the midst of an unprecedented and lengthy build-up of armed forces prior to hostilities in Southwest Asia. Given the amount of time the military had during Desert Shield, could the mistakes of the past be avoided in peace so coverage in war could be undertaken without significant controversy?

The initial pool activation for Operation Desert Shield did not provide any positive signs. As in Just Cause and Urgent Fury, pool members missed the first phase of the deployment. LtCmdr. Greg Hartung, DOD National Media Pool Coordinator, oversaw the activation of the pool and its departure from Washington, D.C. for Saudi Arabia on August 12, 1990. The pool landed in Rihyad the next day, about nine days after the first U.S. troops hit the ground.[1]

Hartung said despite the late arrival, media coverage of Desert Shield was planned from the beginning as part of the operations order. LtCol. Mike Gallagher, Head of Media Relations for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), confirmed this, stating news media coverage for the deployment was outlined in an annex to the operations order.[2]

Hartung said reporters' entry on the scene was delayed by resistance from the Saudi government to allowing the media in country to cover the build-up. Hartung said Cheney had to make a

personal appeal to Saudi authorities to allow entry of the initial pool of 17 reporters.

Responding to media complaints, Defense Secretary Cheney said, "I do not have the final authority over what kind of access the government of Saudi Arabia grants to our press."[3]

The media expressed little confidence in this explanation. Jack Nelson, Washington bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times, said, "If the president had been interested in having reporters on the scene (from the beginning), we would have been there. Obviously, he was not interested."[4]

Cheney's justification for the delay in media entry does seem suspect in view of the rapid build-up of media personnel once the first pool landed. Their presence expanded from 17 to 80 members within a week. By August 28, when the initial pool was discontinued, more than 250 reporters were in country. With no limits on the media numbers thereafter, the press added another 50 by mid-September. Eventually, the press population leveled off at 450-500 members. This number would swell to more than 900 when the President and Mrs. Bush visited the troops during Thanksgiving.[5]

With the arrival of the initial pool, the CENTCOM PA office was relocated from MacDill Air Force Base to Rihyad to establish a Joint Information Bureau (JIB). It fell to Navy Capt. Mike Sherman to organize the JIB to host the media.

As the number of media representatives grew, Sherman went from handling on an ad hoc basis individual media requests for

visits to air bases, ground troops and ships, to a Query Request Form system. After a member of the media filled out a request form, Sherman would request an Action Officer from the unit to be visited to plan the trip itinerary. A JIB PA officer would accompany the journalist on the visit to insure operational security was not violated in the coverage.[6]

Sherman's comments cast some doubt on the assertions that an annex to the operations order provided the plan of execution for hosting the media coverage to Desert Shield. As he proudly reflected back on his establishment of the JIB in the desert, Sherman said, "We were the bastard children (of the operation)."[7]

Sherman said he was provided no equipment and little manpower from CENTCOM to establish the JIB. He said he "scrounged and begged" gear from the Saudis to establish the JIB. Personal computers belonged to the head chef and manager of the hotel used to house the JIB; the fax machine was also the property of the hotel. Sherman said he also had to beg or borrow water, copiers, paper, toner, MREs and buses.

> "It's been PAO piracy that's been the key so far," Sherman said (early in the operation). "You take what you can get and make the best of it." He described how 140-degree heat threatened to melt a makeshift satellite up-link facility rigged up in a tent next to a Saudi airfield. The JIB experts "found" two industrial air conditioners and sealed the tent with duct tape. "Duct tape's one of the two greatest inventions of mankind," Sherman said. "It's been holding this whole thing together." (8)

Despite his constant complaints, Sherman said it was 4 to 6 weeks before CENTCOM issued a message to the field directing

units to cooperate with and support the JIB. He said CENTCOM eventually provided drivers for the vehicles used to take reporters on their field visits, followed by a few administrative clerks to help sustain the JIB operation as the media representation grew into the hundreds. A fax machine was issued to the JIB in November, but PCs Sherman had on order for several months were not there when he detached from the JIB at the beginning of December, four months after he reported aboard.

Sherman said he had not read the After Action Report from Just Cause or the Sidle Panel report after Urgent Fury. Nor, he said, did he ever see a PA annex to the Desert Shield Operations Order. As he set up the JIB, Sherman fell back on his experience and the concept of press coverage espoused by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Secretary Cheney -- to allow total access by the media to the deployment within the constraints of operational security.

While these organization-building problems may have contributed to the media's feeling that they weren't being allowed wide enough access, the restrictions on the media's coverage created an even greater furor. As reporters arrived in Saudi Arabia, they were briefed on the catagories of information that were not releasable. These categories were:

(1) Number of troops.
(2) Number of aircraft.
(3) Number of other equipment (e.g. artillery, tanks, radars, trucks, etc.).
(4) Names of military installations/geographic locations of U.S. military units in Saudi Arabia.
(5) Information regarding future operations.

(6) Information concerning security precautions at military installations in Saudi Arabia.
(7) Names/hometowns of U.S. military personnel being interviewed, and names of Saudis being interviewed. Commanders of units were excepted from this provision.
(The list omits number 8)
(9) Photography that could show level of security at military installations in Saudi Arabia.
(10) Photography that would reveal the name or specific location of military forces or installations.
And the rules add, "If you are not sure whether an action you take will violate a ground rule, consult with your escort officer PRIOR TO TAKING THAT ACTION." (9)

Michael Gartner, president of NBC News, said, "It is understandable why the government would want to keep secret the most sensitive strategies of a war, but this censorship in Saudi Arabia - a censorship of facts, not of plans and strategies - exceeds even the most stringent censorship of World War II."[10]

Sydney H. Schanberg commented in the Long Island Newsday: "Everyone understands the need for security and secrecy in wartime. We understand censorship. We're not interested in giving Saddam Hussein information that could lead to American casualties ... (but) the arrangements in Saudi Arabia look like solitary confinement.."[11]

Other complaints heard from reporters included a lack of regular briefs to get the 'big picture,' a deficiency identified by the Operation Just Cause After Action Report, and the rarity of meetings with senior military commanders.[12]

AP correspondent Edie Lederher saw the handling of the media in Desert Shield a result of press coverage of Vietnam. A veteran of Vietnam reporting, Lederher recounted a theme voiced by many members of the media. This argument holds that the

military blames the press for turning the American people against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Because of this, future conflicts will be marked by a rigidly controlled press, presenting only those things that engender support for the military.

Lederher said while all reporters in Saudi Arabia wanted unlimited access to the operation, they would have preferred at least more opportunities for field trips, which she termed "infrequent," and overnight stays with troops in the field, which she called "limited."[13]

Sherman responded to these complaints by saying, "The press will always complain unless they are allowed to go anywhere, anytime."[14] He said besides operational security considerations, reporters do not understand host nation sensitivities. The media was frustrated at times because they couldn't film activities, such as religious services, that would offend the Saudis.

Sherman said an additional limiting factor for field coverage was established by the unit commander. The commanders decided what press coverage they could handle. The ability to handle a media visit depended on workload and the unit's situation, which was constantly changing in the Desert Shield environment.

Despite the complaints, DOD Pool Coordinator Hartung described military-media relations during Desert Shield as "excellent." He said the media was "griping" because they grew bored after covering the build up from every angle. He said the

JIB told him "There's no place out there they (the press) haven't been - the problem is they are all trying to get the great story and there's nothing new."[15] He said that during Operation Desert Shield more than 50 journalists were sent to the field daily.

Both Hartung and Sherman were at a loss to explain why CENTCOM not been able to provide regular briefs to the media. Despite being authorized to hold the briefings early in the operation, the first major press briefing wasn't held until December 19, after which weekly briefings were held.

CENTCOM Media Relations Head Gallagher, who characterized military-media relations in Desert Shield as being "very, very good," explained that operational commitments delayed establishing regular briefings. He said the time it would have taken field commanders to collect and transmit the information necessary to support frequent briefings was better used concentrating on operational commitments during the critical first stages of the build up.

Many of these problems didn't seem to appear during shipboard reporting. Although guidelines were also issued to these reporters, Newport Daily News reporter Joe Ruggeri spent eight days on board USS Samuel B. Roberts during the force build up in a relatively unhindered atmosphere. Ruggeri said he was not escorted around the ship, but that he was denied access to certain classified spaces.[16]

Ruggeri said the crew relaxed around him after the second day of his stay, and they seemed willing to discuss with him

things in a candid fashion. He said he would type his stories on the ship executive officer's PC, and the Communications Center would transmit the stories to Norfolk, for further transfer via Western Union to his newspaper.

The ease with which reporters can be dealt with on board ship may result in part from the naturally controlled conditions. This self-contained environment, where an article can be written, reviewed for security violations and transmitted in a relatively short period of time, would seem to give the ship's skipper a feeling of total control over the situation.

Overall, Gallagher saw the media presence having a "considerable" impact on Operation Desert Shield. A military operation in a potentially hostile environment has never had such extensive media coverage, he said. The influence this coverage has on the politicians watching the deployment and the citizens whose support is needed, can be critical to the success of the operation. Gallagher said the presence of the media has had a dramatically positive affect on the troops' morale, as they know their efforts are being communicated back to the home front.

The former JIB OIC Sherman said the media can play the role of a "searchlight," seeking out those areas where the military needs to improve.[17]

Both Sherman and Gallagher said there had been no major operational security violations in Desert Shield. Most violations were inadvertent releases that contradicted media guidelines concerning release of names or units; these rules

were relaxed early in the operation. Sherman said on numerous occasions he witnessed reporters ask PA officers to read their stories for such violations.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

Sherman believes media presence in military operations "is a part of our Constitution." He sees the only free and open communication about the military happening through the media. "I wouldn't trust the military to do it -- our filters are much more finely screened. We're too sensitive." He said too many individuals involved in military PA efforts think in terms of positive and negative stories, when they should be concerned with balanced or unbalanced coverage.[1]

It is a point that could be well taken by the military. A review of Operation Desert Shield shows that, despite some outstanding efforts to get the media to the troops, we continue to make some of the same mistakes of the past.

We have established a pattern of excluding media pools from the first stages of operations in hostile environments. While these decisions are usually made at the National Command Authorities level, it is hard to picture these determinations being made without military advice. In that respect, if the military commander has good reasons for this exclusion, then the services should clearly articulate these reasons immediately to DOD so that policy may reflect these concerns. If the military sees media presence having a chilling affect on the complete range of options available to a commander in crisis or war (of which one option might be to order a unit into an assault

realizing high casualty rates are probable), then those points should be presented for argument so that future actions in this area might at least be understood, if not agreed to, by all parties.

Along this same line, the military should take it upon itself to educate the media, particularly the field reporters, on combat operations. Being a veteran correspondent of past conflicts does not make that reporter a master tactician or an expert in military affairs. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the military to take the initiative to educate reporters not only on significant actions of the operation, but also on the specific affects those actions have on the operation as a whole.

Rather than make jokes about the uninformed questions asked at briefings, the military should be seeking out those reporters for educational purposes. The military needs to keep uppermost in its mind that what is reported will have a profound influence on the opinions of both government officials and the public. Support of both is vital to the success of any military operation.

The media could do their part in this education process as well. If the major news organizations hired recently retired combat arms officers of the O-5 and O-6 level to serve in the field with the reporters, the reporters understanding of the big picture of battle would increase significantly. Hiring retired generals to sit in studios in New York to interpret the battle is of questionable value when the collectors of the news

organizations' information (reporters in the field) are unsure of the data they should be collecting.

Just as critical to the efficient handling of media coverage is to map out the hosting function from the start of the operation planning process. Again this is an area upon which the military has established a pattern of neglect. This is one area that warrants more critical analysis by both the military and government officials.

Finally, while the pool concept of reporting may indeed be an efficient means to ensure coverage of military operations from their early stages, the restrictions placed on pools needs close examination. The primary purpose military commanders espouse for these restrictions is operational security. In past wars, when the press wasn't nearly so restricted, major operational security problems rarely if ever occurred. In the unlimited access of Vietnam, the problem the military had with the media wasn't operational security violations, it was the stories that colored the military in a not-so-flattering light. The military structure needs to take an honest look at itself to see if these restrictions aren't, in fact, a means used to avoid these negative stories.

For each restriction imposed on the media, the military should once again shift to an education mode and explain in the most detailed manner it can, how a violation of a restriction can impact the military operation. Members of the military should not assume the media will understand all the reasons behind these

guidelines. The military should make every attempt, outside releasing classified information, to describe the particular impact that release of specific types of information can have on the operation.

To the credit of the military, detailed plans for combat pool coverage were ready for implementation when Desert Storm started. Reporters were on the aircraft carriers and air bases from which the initial strikes were launched. In addition, daily situation briefs for reporters have been held since Desert Storm began. The skeptic might wonder if this would have been the case had not the lengthy build up of Desert Shield preceded Desert Storm.

Military commanders must accept that in today's high tech "information age," they must deal with the media, particularly in operations in hostile environments. The military cannot long sustain an operation without the consent of the political leaders and the support of the public. In our society that consent and support must be gained through, among other ways, the accurate and balanced reporting of successes on the battlefield. The military must keep its operational attention focused on its real foe, and not make an enemy out of the media.

NOTES

Chapter I

1. Liz Trotta, "Press vs. Army: Front Action in an Old Battle," The Wall Street Journal, 13 September 1990, p. A-16.

Chapter II

1. Thomas M. Daly, "Grenada and Media Access," Marine Corps Gazette, June 1987, p. 64.

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Chapter III

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2. Interview with LtCol. Mike Gallagher, USAF, Head of Media Relations for U.S. Central Command, Rihyad, Saudi Arabia: 2 January 1990.

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5. Hartung interview.

6. Interview with Capt. Mike Sherman, USN, former Officer in Charge Joint Information Bureau in Rihyad, S.A., Los Angeles: 18 December 1990.

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Chapter IV

1. Sherman interview.

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